

DRASH – Parshat Eikev
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As we started reading *Devarim* this year, I already knew that I would be leading the Torah discussion for this parshah. I quickly realized that, rather than focusing on this specific *parshah*, I wanted to focus on the overarching theme of the whole book of Deuteronomy.

As I was reading, I actually solved something that was a mystery that has always perplexed me. Namely, why is this book – *Devarim* in Hebrew – called Deuteronomy in English. And what does Deuteronomy even mean? I expect that many of you know, but for those perplexed like me, let me explain. The Hebrew name derives from the first significant word in the book – *Devarim*, which means and refers to *the words (of Moses)*. So where does Deuteronomy come from? It comes from the Greek – *deuteros + nomos, meaning “second law”* -- since the book is actually Moses’ re-telling of God’s laws for a second time.

Devarim starts after 40 years of wandering in the desert, on the cusp of entering the Promised Land. The Israelites are situated on the eastern bank of the Jordan River, on the verge of entering the land of Canaan. Moses knows that his death is imminent, so he takes the opportunity to recount the experiences of the past 40 years, appoints Joshua his successor to lead the people, and restates the Ten Commandments and other laws. He takes the opportunity to revisit many of the high points (getting the 10 Commandments on Mt. Sinai) and low points (the golden calf) over the last 40 years. As Janice Steinshneider said last week, it has the feel of an “intimate conversation with Moshe Rabenu” rather than a powerful oration from the summit.

Today’s *Parshah*, Parshat Eikev, is the 3rd *parshah* of Deuteronomy as Moses continues his closing address to the people. He is talking to the community, many of whom were not yet alive at the Exodus. He is not only conveying messages from God, but talking to the people, his people, from his own perspective. It’s his “retrospective” on his life and the lasting messages he wants to give the Israelite people – chastising, prophesying, and instructing his people before he dies.

As such, it’s what we might now call an “**ETHICAL WILL.**” What is an ethical will? It is a document that passes values from one generation to the next. It is actually an ancient Jewish tradition. Moses’ “speech” to the people is not even the first such ethical will in the Torah. The first “ethical will” is in Genesis when Jacob gathers his sons to offer them his blessings and to request that they bury him in Canaan with his ancestors, not in Egypt where he will die.

Moses’ oration in Deuteronomy includes many things. He is recounting the history of the Exodus – but it clearly, as is all history, from a particular perspective. He decides what to include – as well as what not to include. He decides how to recount significant episodes during

the Exodus, attributing emotions to both God and to himself. In addition, he is telling the people how he wants them to act, think, and behave after he dies.

So, I decided to do a little research on ethical wills and look at more recent examples.

- The goal of writing an ethical will is to link a person to their history, articulate their ethical and spiritual values, and communicate a legacy to those they love – both family, friends, and communities.
- The content of an ethical will may be similar to that of a memoir or autobiography – or perhaps an NPS “Story Corps” -- but it is distinguished by its intention to transmit values. It can include family history, blessings, hopes & dreams, life-lessons, requests for forgiveness, rationale for personal decisions during one’s lifetime, stories about meaningful objects, ways to be remembered after death.
- Ethical wills are generally spiritual documents, windows into the souls of those who write them, and are often a treasured part of a family’s history. These “legacy letters” sum up what you have learned in life, and what you want most for, and from, your loved ones.

An ethical will is not an easy thing to write, nor is it often an easy thing to receive.

In my work as a financial planner, I often work with clients on their legal and financial estate planning documents, but I have not focused on ethical wills.

To help me research and understand ethical wills, I read a book called Ethical Wills: A Modern Jewish Treasury edited by Jack Riemer and Nathaniel Stampfer, published in 1983. They include several dozen ethical wills in 4 sections:

- (1) Traditional Wills primarily from the 19th century that focus on how to live and how to die in accordance with Jewish law
- (2) Wills from the Holocaust that respond in different ways to the catastrophe that overtook the writers
- (3) Wills from the Land of Israel that reflect the diversity of meaning that Israel the Land has had for Jews and how they have responded to it
- (4) Wills of contemporary American Jews.

I want to share some a few short excerpts from various ethical wills that I read.

This letter was written in 1854 by Benjamin Roth to his son Solomon just prior to Solomon's leaving for the United States from Germany.

My Dear Son:

It is doubtful whether we shall see each other again in life ... At this moment of our parting, since I can no longer be near you, let me give you the following precepts for life to take with you. Obey them, follow them, and you will never be unhappy.

He then articulates 21 precepts starting with:

- *"Always seek to keep your conscience clear, i.e., never commit an action that you will have to regret afterward."*
- *Never leave the religion that is yours by birth, the faith of your parents and ancestors.*
- *"Sunlight and moonlight are powerful lamps. But the light of your reason must eclipse them, i.e., do nothing in haste, nothing without due thought.*
- *Long have I pondered, searched, and examined as to what constitutes man's true happiness. I have found only one bliss for him: virtue and fear of God.*

He ends with the following:

God make thee as Ephraim and Manasseh, like Moses in his humility, like Solomon in his wisdom, like Samson in his strength, like Absalom in his beauty, like Hezekiah in his righteousness, and like David in his reverence.

Sholom Aleichem, was born in 1859 and died in 1916. What is not widely known is that he spent his last years in New York. He wrote an ethical will "to be published on the day of my death." It was read into the Congressional Record and published in the New York Times. It consisted of 10 points, including:

1. *Wherever I may die, let me be buried not among the rich and famous, but among plain Jewish people, the workers, the common folks, so that my tombstone may honor the simple graves around me and the simple graves honor mine, even as the plain people honored their folk writer in his time.*
2. *Let there be no arguments or debates among my colleagues who may wish to memorialize me by erecting a monument in New York. I shall not be able to rest peacefully in my grave if my friends engage in such nonsense. The best monument for me will be if my books are read.*

He also wrote his epitaph, written in Yiddish, which was engraved on his tombstone in the Workman's Circle plot in the Mt. Carmel Cemetery in Brooklyn, NY.

The number of ethical wills written by women in the modern period is far greater than by women in earlier periods. What is equally noteworthy is the observation that in their ethical wills, women often draw upon psychological insights to personalize their hopes and counsel.

One woman who was writing an ethical will as part of a Jewish studies course said: "It's like crafting a mission statement."

Rosie Rosenzweig wrote an ethical will as part of a workshop at her synagogue in Massachusetts as a way of preparing for Yom Kippur in 1979.

My dear family,

... Shakespeare did say: "A rose by any other name still smells as sweet., but so it is with character from which emanates the good name ... you can be in rags, in poor state, a misunderstood laborer, a misunderstood professional ... but your good character will earn you your way. It goes without saying you'll work hard toward your chosen goal by education, but it is the uses of your intelligence as you would use it to build character that I address now. If there is a pleasure in acquiring knowledge, there is greater pleasure in applying it.

She closes: *Live out your lives wisely, well, and with few regrets."*

Your loving mother.

Over the last 2 weeks, there were 2 very powerful "ethical wills" that I read.

- The first occurrence was as I was re-reading Leon Thorne's (Manny's father's) memoir, [It Will Yet Be Heard](#) in preparation for the Fabrangon book club. In the afterword of the book, written by Leon's children – Manny and his 3 siblings – the book closes with the following:

"Our father carried in his wallet an ethical will that had been composed by his grandfather's grandfather, Meilich Backenroth, who in the mid-1800's was one of the discoverers of oil in Austria-Hungary:

My precious children, grandchildren, and all the offspring who come from their loins. Hold dear our luminous treasure, our sacred Torah; always love your Jewish people and what the Jewish people represent; never be over-proud and arrogant; help the Jewish people with your money; and have the faith of the righteous."

- The second “ethical will” is one that I certainly hope and expect that many of you have read. Similar to Sholom Aleichem, shortly before he died on July 18th, John Lewis wrote his final message to the American people and sent it to the New York Times to be published posthumously on the day of his funeral. It was published on July 30, 2020. If you haven’t read it, I encourage you to do so. Alternatively – or in addition -- listen to the reading by Morgan Freeman that was aired on *The Last Word with Lawrence O’Donnell* on MSNBC the same day.

Link to John Lewis’ Op-Ed: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/30/opinion/john-lewis-civil-rights-america.html>

Link to Morgan Freeman’s reading of Op-Ed: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i2DSkAys-8>

The Op-Ed was titled: “Together, You Can Redeem the Soul of Our Nation.” Let me read the first and last paragraphs:

While my time here has now come to an end, I want you to know that in the last days and hours of my life you inspired me. You filled me with hope about the next chapter of the great American story when you used your power to make a difference in our society. Millions of people motivated simply by human compassion laid down the burdens of division. Around the country and the world, you set aside race, class, age, language and nationality to demand respect for human dignity.

Though I may not be here with you, I urge you to answer the highest calling of your heart and stand up for what you truly believe. In my life, I have done all I can do demonstrate the way of peace, the way of love and nonviolence is the more excellent way. Now it is your turn to let freedom ring.

When historians pick up their pens to write the story of the 21st century, let them say that it was your generation who laid down the heavy burdens of hate at last and that peace finally triumphed over violence, aggression, and war. So I say to you, walk with the wind, brothers and sisters, and let the spirit of peace and the power of everlasting love be your guide.

We are now into the 5th month of the pandemic which has, for many of us, reframed our thinking about life. And in a few weeks, we will enter the month of Elul and prepare for the High Holidays. So, this seems like an opportune time to read Moses’ final statements to the nation he tended for four decades.

Here are a few questions to open the discussion.

1. Why does Moses start his oration after the Exodus in Egypt? Why does he exclude any of the earlier parts of his life? If you were to write the story of your life, where would you start? Are there key events that would be important to share? What key events might you decide to exclude?
2. At some level, Moses is giving directions to the people to listen to God and follow His commandments. He is admonishing them to act in a way after his death that he was not 100% successful in getting them to do while he was alive. Is this an effective message?
3. There can be many intended recipients of an ethical will – children, extended family, friends, or the larger community (aka John Lewis). How does this frame Moses' story? Who would be the intended recipients of your ethical will?
4. What gives your life meaning? Or, as my daughter Hannah often asks me: "What gave you joy today?"